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Evacuation still possible

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Federal officials said Saturday that overheated fuel in the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island was cooling. But they said thousands might still have to be evacuated if engineers perform a risky procedure to remove a critical gas bubble.

Nuclear technicians said they have the means to remove the bubble, but this operation could increase the risk of a chemical explosion that would rupture the reaction containment building and could release large amounts of radiation.

Metropolitan Edison officials, who operate the facility, claimed a one-third reduction in the size of the bubble and said the risk of a melt-down had been cut, But Harold Denton of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission told reporters in Harrisburg: "My own staff tells me the size of the bubble hasn't changed much."

If the bubble grows it could rob the nuclear fuel assembly of access to its coolant, overheating the plant and threatening a melt-down.

At a news conference in Washington Saturday, Joseph M. Hendrie, chairman of the NRC, said evacuation of citizens living 10 to 20 miles downwind of the facility was "certainly a possibility" when and if technicians decide to force the gaseous bubble from the vessel containing the nuclear core.

Hendrie said an evacuation "may turn out as a prudent precautionary measure" but that no decision has been made.

He said the reactor was stable and that the nuclear fuel was continuing to cool.

On Friday, NRC officials disclosed the "remote possibility" of a melt-down. Fears of radioactive release, whether melt-down or simply gaseous emissions, sent hundreds of nearby residents fleeing to distant towns.

With low-level radioactive gases still beaming from the plant on the Susquehanna River, Gov. Dick Thornburgh extended his advisory that preschool children and pregnant women stay at least five miles from the plant. Experts have cited the vulnerabilty of fetuses and young children to radiation.

Hendrie said that no move to force the bubble out is expected "in the immediate future" and any action must be "very carefully thought through."

Vice President Jack Herbein of Met Ed said, "I personally think the crisis is over." But Denton, chief of Operations at the NRC, said two hours later: "My own view is that the crisis won't be over until we have the core in a cold shutdown mode."

Herbein said repeated venting of radioactive gases reduced the size of the gas bubble to "two-thirds the size it was yesterday." He said that made the

Photo by Daryl Cornick

WATER STREET — This street in the village of Mishicot became "Water Street" Saturday as the East Twin River overflowed . its banks. Two village officials used a rope stretched between two trees as a guide as they crossed the water-filled street. At left is Jim Bydalek, village clerk, and at right is Bill LaRose, superintendent of the sewage treatment plant.